# A CRITIQUE OF THE USEFULNESS OF THEORIES IN EXPLAINING SOCIO-POLITICAL PHENOMENON

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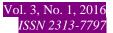
## ABSTRACT

A theory presents a systematic way of understanding events, behaviors and/or situations. It is a set of interrelated concepts, definitions, and propositions that explains or predicts events or situations by specifying relations among variables. Theories are by their nature abstract and not content-or topic-specific. Theories vary in the extent to which they have been conceptually developed and empirically tested; however, 'testability' is an important feature of a theory. Social science theories are better understood as models that work in a limited range of settings, rather than laws of science which hold and apply universally. A theory is therefore central to explaining the dynamics of world politics. No single theory captures the complexity of contemporary world politics. Theories diagnose, predict, prescribe and evaluate. They also try to explain what states try to achieve in the external realm and when they try to achieve it. This paper will thus critically interrogate the usefulness of theories in explaining socio-economic phenomenon.

**Keywords:** Theory, Socio-Political, Phenomenon, World Politics, Parsimony, International Relations.

## INTRODUCTION

The concept theory is based on the act of viewing analytically and generalizing contextually. It is thus based upon a process of abstraction. That is, theory involves stepping back, or abstracting, from that which one is viewing (James, 2006). The word has been in use in English since at least the late 16th century (Harper, 2008). Modern uses of the word 'theory' are derived from the original definition, but have taken on new shades of meaning, still based on the idea that a theory is a thoughtful and rational explanation of the general nature of things (Cornford, 1991). Different scholars have come up with different definitions of the term 'theory'. Burchill (2007) states that a theory represents the focus of a whole field or range of uses, bundling together the history of international ideas, the history of international relations as a scientific discipline, the social philosophy of international relations and the epistemology and methodology of international relations.

According to Tubingam (1976), a theory is defined as a net which we throw out in order to catch the world to rationalize, explain and dominate it. A theory has also been defined as a system of ideas intended to explain something such as a single or collection of facts, events or phenomena. A theory has also been defined by Cook, (2009) as a causal explanation. It identifies recurring relations between two or more phenomena and explains why that relationship obtains. It helps us sort important factors from the unimportant; that is, which trends, facts, events, etc deserve the focus of our attention and why (Cook, 2009). A key test of a theory is parsimony, the capacity to explain the maximum number of phenomena with the minimum number of assumptions. Theories simplify reality and help us understand it (Cook,

2009). A theory of international relations is a set of ideas that explains how the international system works. It is backed up with evidence. The importance of theory in international relations is now well recognized (Buzan, 1995).

## A Critique on the Use of Theories in Explaining Socio-Political Phenomena

Everyone uses theories, whether they know it or not. One cannot analyze data without resorting to causal explanations. But theories often lack the specificity needed to make and implement decisions. As a result, policy-makers are often dismissive of the value of theories (Cook, 2009). No single theory captures the complexity of contemporary world politics. Theories of international relations seek to explain what states try to achieve in the external realm and when they try to achieve it. Theories have several components. They diagnose, predict, prescribe and evaluate (Cook, 2009). Nevertheless, Smith (1996) believes that not all theories predict nor simply explain. They tell us what possibilities exist for human action and intervention. They define not merely our explanatory possibilities but also our ethical and practical horizons. For example the theory of international relations maintains that war was partly the result of international anarchy and partly the result of misunderstandings, miscalculations and recklessness on the part of politicians who had lost control of events in 1914.

Theories have been used to explain the nature of states in the international system and they show how states are the key players on the globe. This is the belief by realism. However, today it is more problematic to maintain that states are the main players on the globe. A theory is often based on general principles that are independent of the thing being explained. Theories have generally been used to explain different socio-political phenomena in international relations. According to Bill Newman, theories have been used to explain the behavior of states in the international system. For instance the theory of classical realism argues that all states seek power. They see other powerful states as rivals, because power, when it is not in ones hands, it is threatening. Peace is based upon a stable balance of power. That is to say that the big players in the international systems are roughly equal in power resources. So no one thinks they can win war. The US and USSR were rivals in the cold war because they were the two most powerful states after the Second World War. They were both wary of each other's power and became enemies. But they did not go to war because they were roughly equal in power.

The explanation of why there are power struggles and rivalries among states is found in theories (Arash, 2009). This explanation is found in the idea of neo-realism. According to Arash, the theory argues that the function of the nature of the international system is the principle of all power struggles. States are out there alone. There is no world government looking for states, no rules that cannot be easily broken. The world is anarchy and states do what they can, to get away with to gain power and they do what they must to protect themselves. The cold war was caused by the fact that there were only two powerful states that survived the Second World War Since there was no world government or rules of behavior to restrain the rivalry, it became the cold war. But critical theorists are very concerned with the inability of this theory to explain the end of the cold war and the two world wars. A theory of international politics can describe the range of likely outcomes of the actions and interactions of states within a given system and show how the range of expectations varies as systems change. It can tell us what possibilities are posed by systems of different structure, but it cannot tell us how effectively the units of a system will respond to those pressures and possibilities. In general, a theory of international politics bears on the foreign policies of nations while claiming to explain only certain aspects of them (Waltz, 1996). In addition to the above, some theories explain why states behave the way they do in the international system. States do not just seek power and they do not just fear

other powerful states. There are reasons which make states seek power and why states fear other states. (Arash, 2009). This is an explanation put forth by neo-classical realism. For instance, during the cold war, the differences in ideology between the US and USSR was a factor in the US-USSR rivalry that exacerbated the tendency for two powerful states to form rivalries. However, according to a scholar Ayoob (1995), international relations theories are limited in their ability to explain the workings of the international system because they ignore the behavior of a majority of non-Western members of the international system. They fail to provide adequate explanations for the causes of conflict or guides to its management and resolution. He also maintains that neo realism and neo liberalism do not provide an adequate map of international reality.

Liberalism is a theory that suggests that there can be order in the world if states cooperate. It refutes the fact that the world is always about rivalry. States do not just compete or worry about power but they try to build a more just world order. States have learnt that cooperation is a better strategy than conflict. States try to create reinforcable international law. States are progressive forces for social justice. During the cold war, there were different values between the US and USSR. The key to the US and USSR animosity was the repressive and murderous nature of the Soviet state. There were also decades worth of US-USSR cooperation in the midst of the cold war, that is during moments of arms control and lack of direct conflict. Besides, the theory of neo- liberalism makes us understand the way in which institutions can influence the behavior of states by spreading values or creating rule-based behavior. A good example is the role of the United Nations or World Trade Organization in shaping the foreign policy behavior of states. One can use the cold war and suggest ways to fix the UN to make it more effective.

Theories of international relations make us understand the role of psychological processes that is, perception, misperception, belief systems on the foreign policy behavior of states. This phenomenon can be explained by the cognitive theories. For instance one can look at the shared images of the US and USSR political leaders had of each other and explain the cold war as the product of these negative images and the inability of either state to reshape the perceptions of the other .One can also be able to understand the state behavior in the context of state characteristics. All states are unique and have a set of defining political, cultural, economic, social or religious characteristics that influence its foreign policy. States have identities and these identities define their behavior in the international system. The US had a foreign policy character. Russia has a foreign policy character. The cold war is a product of the clash of these identities. The end of the cold war may have been a function of changes in the Russian identity.

Theories of international relations enables one to see events in a broader , more analytical, more systematic framework, rather than a limited and time-bound one, analytically, that is vital. That is to say, studying theories allows students of international relations to analyze global politics in future. When students only learn history, or contemporary issues, their knowledge of global politics is limited in time because new issues and events are always arising. Theories are also used as a means to understand the big picture but also to investigate specific events such as the re-emergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, US intervention in Iraq, Peace keeping missions in Kosovo and Bosnia and the inability of the UN to prevent genocide in Rwanda. All these events can be explained by game theory, which is restricted to the analysis of the interactions among nation states based on security and defense issue. The purpose of theory in the early years of the discipline of international relations was to change the world for the better by removing the blight of war theory cannot be disconnected from the actual world of international politics. This is true with the liberal internationalists who believed the world to be profound other than it should be (Howard, 1978). The theories make us understand the relationship

between countries that pursue the ideology of democracy. According to Moravcsik, the theory of democratic peace states that democratic states do not fight each other. States are rational decision makers and so they build coalitions, lobby, put pressure on bureaucracies and they act collectively or individually. As stated by Mnungu (2003) debaters have always implicitly relied on theories, especially the international relations theories to make arguments. Confidence building measures, trade agreements such as GATT or the WTO and climate treaties are all examples of policies based upon the rationale of liberal institutionalism, in that these structures and institutions should encourage peaceful behavior.

However, the theory does not explain the breakdown of institutions or their effectiveness. Besides, there is no rule-observance in global politics another use of theories in debates is the advocacy of disadvantages about geopolitics. These advantages normally state that the affirmative's plan exerts US influence in a particular region over a particular issue and in doing so, reduces the influence of another actor, usually a country. These arguments are common when talking about Russia, focusing on Japan, China and India. This explanation of affirmative plan has been refuted especially by critical theorists and in debate rounds, this explanation has been labeled as threat construction, an argument grounded in identity politics which places an emphasis on identity and discourse in world politics. An example of this is a case that deters potential Russian aggression by stationing troops in neighboring states. Nevertheless, it should be noted that identities are constantly changing and adapting and are influenced by others.

Theories take complexity and try to simplify it (Jorgensen, 2010). They bring order to a mass of phenomena which without it would remain disconnected. According to Waltz (2010), theories explain laws, making them parallel to the definition of the term in the natural sciences. Laws illustrate association between variables, while theories explain the causal connections. The major theory of realism has provided a dominant framework for understanding international relations and it shapes the thinking of virtually every foreign policy professional today in the U.S. and much of the rest of the world (Fukuyama, 1995). Nevertheless, some policy makers pay relatively little attention to the vast theoretical literature in international relations and many scholars seem uninterested in doing policy-relevant work. (CIAO, 2005) .These tendencies are unfortunate because theory is an essential tool of statecraft. Many policy debates ultimately rest on competing theoretical visions, and relying on a false or flawed theory can lead to major foreign policy disasters (CIAO, 2005).

Theory remains essential for diagnosing events, explaining their causes, prescribing responses and evaluating the impact of different policies. As early as the 1970s, Bull (1973) argued that the reason we must be concerned with the theory as well as the history of the subject, is that all discussions of international politics proceed upon theoretical assumptions which we should acknowledge and investigate rather than ignore and leave unchallenged. However, this was criticized by Wallace (1996) who states that excessive preoccupation with theory represents a withdrawal from an analysis of real world issues and a sense of responsibility for policy relevance.The structure of the world in terms of the economic capabilities is well understood through the explanations offered by the theories. Wallestein states that the world systems theory provides this structure by showing the hierarchy of the world, that is core states, periphery and semi-periphery states. Israel is much closer to the core while Palestine is closer to the periphery due to Israel's military power and economic strength. Nevertheless, because of the inherent dynamics of the world, the world systems theory is unjust. There is a social dimension of interaction. Relations between social groups are as important as diplomatic relations between states and governments. The world system we are living in is determined by the global economy. Besides, the theory has a problem predicting if and under what conditions

states may move up or downwards in this hierarchy. Burchil (2009) notes that theories discriminate between actors, relationships, empirical issues, which they judge as being the most important or the most trivial.

## CONCLUSION

Generally, theories acquire dominance in any discipline for different reasons. They can also be the beneficiary of widespread beliefs that they are right for the times or more relevant to the dominant events of the day than are other perspectives. Whether one is a member of a governing coalition, journalist or academic, one will use a theory daily to come to a view on pressing political matters. Theories abstract identify and connect any given phenomenon.

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